

Magonia

Interpreting Contemporary Vision and Belief

70

March 2000
£1.25



Howden Moor Britain's Roswell?

David Clarke tries to separate truth from Myth



Christopher French
reports on how the media treat sceptics



MAGONIA 70
(incorporating MUFOB 117)

MARCH 2000

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SUBSCRIPTION DETAILS
Magonia is available by exchange with other magazines, or by subscription at the following rates for four issues:

UK	£5.00
Europe	£6.00
	10.00 euros
USA	\$13.00
Elsewhere	£7.00

US subscribers must pay in dollar bills. We are unable to accept checks drawn on American banks.

We accept French banknotes at the rate of FF10 to £1.00

Cheques and money orders must be made payable to JOHN RIMMER, not 'Magonia'.

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Unsettled Ufologists

OH NO! Not another 'Unsettled Ufologists' editorial already? But there do seem to be enough potential problems in British ufology at the moment to warrant one. This time, however, there are one or two encouraging signs as well. I suggest that before carrying on with this Editorial, you flip quickly to the back of the magazine and read Peter Rogerson's reviews of the books by Peter Hough and Larry O'Hara.

Done that? Then I'll continue. Since Peter wrote the review of O'Hara's book, a couple of things have happened which tend to support O'Hara's argument. Forget his overwrought prose and the nonsense about MI5 paying people to infiltrate ufology, then reverse the usual formula: forget the issues and concentrate on the personalities (but don't you *really* want to know the truth behind the Battle of the Coal Shed?). Following the setting up of UFOIN (Remember? 'British ufology has been reborn' and all that on the Internet) a number of established British researchers (who'd probably object bitterly if I called them an 'establishment', but you can guess who they are - most have them have appeared in *Magonia* from time to time) have been co-operating in an informal manner and doing worthwhile investigation work, largely through the Internet. This is of course a system which MUFOB/Magonia has been advocating since long before the Internet was even thought of (we used to say "over a couple of jars in the pub" which was what people did before they were stuck in front of computers all night).

For one reason or another - largely I suspect his well-developed ability to get right up people's noses - Matthews was not involved in the development of this 'not-a-UFO-group'. Deciding that his existing Lancashire society was not big enough for his leadership qualities and dynamism, he announced the formation of the 'National UFO Research Association'. This aims to be a mass membership organisation, but the rules are clear from the start: the members will have no say in who runs the Association, or what its policies are. They just pay a subscription and get a magazine and some conferences. A bit like BUFORA really, or New Labo. If it's around long enough, it's possible that *Magonia* may send a friendly mole to join this organisation and bring back reports.

Well, we'll wait and see where this leads, probably to wild denunciations of UFOIN. However O'Hara's contention that Matthews is a person who has an almost pathological need to join organisations, then disrupt them and move on to new adventures, seem to be vindicated by events, and fortunately some of the ufologists who leapt rather prematurely to Matthews' defence are now doing some rapid backtracking.

Now on to Peter Hough. If you've by now read Peter R's review of *Visitation: the certainty [sic] of alien activity* you'll see that he's getting rather hot under the collar about it; and I must say I tend to agree with him. Although about 90% of the book is credulous old rehash stuff, the remaining 10% is extremely disturbing.

I posted the review to the UFOIN Internet debate before printing it here. The immediate response was that Peter R had gone over the top, no-one was going to take the book seriously, Peter H wasn't a major figure in British ufology, and so on.

But again a few people seem to have had second thoughts (possibly after actually reading the book!), and started to take a serious look at the way they deal with the abduction question. The possibility that ufologists should drop the entire abduction phenomenon is at last being seriously discussed (again, I must point out, years after Peter Rogerson and Kevin McClure urged this in *Magonia*). The suggestion now is of a report urging ufologists to drop the subject, which will be distributed to the media and research groups. The idea would be to emphasise to the media that this is not a subject that can be wrapped up in jokey features with references to *The X-Files*.

I feel that this is a worthwhile project, it is debatable how realistic it might be. The abduction legend has grown deeply into popular culture, and a principled stand by a few people may not be enough to reverse public perceptions. There has been talk of allying with mental health professionals and people who are concerned with false-memory syndrome and similar issues. However if such a campaign does dissuade a few enthusiastic amateurs from dabbling in backyard psychotherapy with confused and vulnerable individuals, then it may be worth taking on the challenge.

Editorial Notes

Secret Truth, Myth and Madness

Roswell meets Peak Practice

David Clarke

"This pattern... with a discredited case being tenaciously supported by an increasingly convoluted set of claims and counterclaims has already been well-established in the Fortean world... If the following for such cases continues... it is likely that it is the needs of the audience rather than any persuasive arguments in the cases that keeps them alive..."

Neil Nixon (1)

THE FOLKLORIST JAN Harold Brunvand, in his classic study of 'New' Urban Legends *The Choking Doberman*, refers to what he calls 'The Secret Truth' as a primary theme in modern conspiracy theories. It would, if revealed, cause panic among the population in a manner similar to that which is claimed to have followed the transmission of the famous *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast in 1938. Brunvand includes what he calls the most dramatic of the 'suppressed truth' stories in his collection under the title 'the landed Martians.' This is the seminal claim that a wrecked flying saucer was recovered by the US military at Roswell, New Mex-

ico in July 1947. The 'landed Martians' were the bodies of the craft's humanoid pilots which were subsequently shipped to a super-secret hangar in an isolated desert region of the USA. Those involved in the operation were 'sworn to secrecy or lied to about the nature of their mission.' Brunvand realised he was tiptoeing into dangerous territory when he dismissed the 'evidence' invoked as proof of the Roswell crash, adding: 'I expect that I'll get some angry mail for suggesting that this might be an area of modern legend' [2]. Hence the folklorist ventures into areas of faith and belief which at the turn of the second Millennium are defended with al-

most fundamentalist zeal.

As Curtis Peebles observed in his analysis of black project crash sites [3] the rapidly multiplying versions of the Roswell Incident cannot be regarded as evidence of a real historical event involving the recovery of an alien craft and bodies. Instead they should be viewed as an evolving narrative, a myth in the making. One of the dictionary definitions of

'myth' is that of a commonly held belief which is fundamentally untrue, or without foundation.

Ufological myths are particularly tenacious creatures in the age of the World Wide Web and have a tendency to survive and reproduce themselves like a computer virus. Every day new rumours are transmitted, copied and moulded within the subculture of ufology. Once belief in a mythical event is established, others will seek to replicate its existence elsewhere.

In Britain, a collection of proto- 'crashed saucer' stories dating back to the time of the 'foo fighters' were produced by Nick Redfern in the third volume of his UFO trilogy, *Cosmic Crashes*, in

1999 [4]. Before this title appeared believers in Britain lacked any suitable claims which could be compared with the more detailed 'crash-retrievals' reported from the USA. The British Isles are distinctly lacking in the isolated desert regions favoured as the setting for some of the American 'pickled alien' stories. As a result a desperate search has been ongoing to identify a contender for status as 'the British Roswell.' A number of the incidents listed by Redfern are certainly based upon 'real' events, but as Andy Robert's detailed investigation of the Berwyn Mountains case has demonstrated, their core can invariably be shown to have originated in events of a mundane nature. In this case an earth tremor which coincided with a spectacular display of fireball meteors triggered a police search of a Welsh mountain. The lights of the patrol as they met a group of 'lampers' produced an eyewitness account which became the basis of a 'crashed UFO rumour' twenty years later [5]. Following in the great tradition of Roswell 'anomalous incidents' are now being resurrected as 'UFO crashes' thirty or forty years after they occurred, a time lag which allows memory to fog and gives imagination an exaggeration a fertile breeding ground.

As fertile seeds reproducing themselves within the subject, Redfern's sample will soon become incorporated into the evolving UFO mythology. They will become 'classic cases' formed in the image of the 'landed Martians' but tailored specifically for

The Howden Moor Incident

A summary of the known facts

Emergency services were alerted shortly after 10pm on 24 March 1997 when reports were made to police that a low flying aircraft had crashed into an area of the High Peak moors near Sheffield. Two gamekeepers report hearing a loud aerial explosion at roughly the same time. Police and seven volunteer teams from the Peak District Mountain Rescue Organisation (PDMRO) organise a thorough search of more than 40 square miles of moor centred upon the Howden Reservoir.

The operation begins at 11pm and is called off at 2pm on 25 March.

The search was joined by a police helicopter at 11pm and a Sea King from RAF Leconfield. An Air Exclusion Zone is authorised by the CAA covering a 30 mile radius from the Howden Reservoir to enable the search to continue unhindered. Directed from the ground by the PDMRO the helicopters use heat-seeking equipment specially designed to detect traces of a fire or body heat. No trace of any crash or wreckage is found. The Sea King returns to base at 2pm on 25 March. It represented the single military asset involved in the search operation.

200 personnel were involved in the ground operation, including civilian volunteers, search and rescue dog teams and police. During the latter stages the moors are visited by dozens of passers-by and camera crews from local TV and radio stations.

As a result of appeals on radio and in the local Press, the police receive more than 40 reports of low flying aircraft from a wide area. Two reports describe what appear to be 'unidentified flying objects'. One of these describes a triangular-shaped object spotted from a moving train three hours before and almost thirty miles away from the search zone.

South Yorkshire Police conclude the incident was sparked by a series of unconnected events. These included a low flying aircraft and an aerial explosion which led people to believe a plane had crashed. Checks with civil airports found no reports of aircraft missing. The RAF stated that no military aircraft were operating in the area. The identity of the aircraft which triggered the reports remains unknown.

The British Geological Survey recorded a sonic boom in the Sheffield area on two seismographs and one low-frequency microphone at 10.06 pm on 24 March 1997. Checks reveal a second boom was recorded in the same region at 9.52 pm. The BGS conclude the readings are characteristic of the traces left behind in the wake of a military aircraft breaking the sound barrier. Supersonic flights over land are prohibited by the Military Flying Regulations.

One year after the events the Ministry of Defence admit in a Parliamentary reply to MP Helen Jackson that a low flying exercise involving military aircraft DID take place above the Peak District on the night of 24 March, but was completed by 9.35 pm, 30 minutes before the 'incident' which sparked the search operation. The planes involved in the exercise were Tornado GR1a photo reconnaissance aircraft from RAF Marham in Norfolk. The Ministry of Defence state in parliament and in correspondence that no reports of UFOs were received from military or civilian sources on 24-25 March. Reports received by South Yorkshire Police were classified as 'low flying aircraft' as this was undoubtedly what they were!

An RAF Police investigation was launched into the cause of the sonic booms. A statement by Air Staff 2(A) at Whitehall said that officers "concentrated their enquiries on whether a military aircraft had been in the area concerned at the date in question. Once they had established that military activity was not involved they made no further enquiries to determine what might have caused the noise". The MOD said it was "satisfied that on the date in question, there was no threat to the UK Air Defence Region from hostile military activity".

the needs of a British audience eager for homespun versions of the 'dark side' theories of abduction, back engineering and secret deals between aliens and the Government. As part of this process we should expect the developing stories to absorb the newer beliefs circulated on the World Wide Web by the more fanatical elements of today's conspiracy mongers. These include the elements added to the developing mythology during the course of last decade: the fashionable 'Flying Triangles' and their pilots, the sinister greys with their agenda of animal mutilation and human abduction. The more advanced and psychologically disturbed the storytellers become, the more we hear about implants, crossbreeding and the spreading of ME, AIDS and other horrendous viruses among the alien's alleged victims.

One of these new stories, although not listed by Redfern, has played a pivotal role in the export of the US-based 'crashed saucer' mythology. It has been the subject of heated and vociferous exchanges on newsgroups which have divided ufologists into two camps with fundamentally different approaches to the interpretation of fact and evidence. Cleverly packaged and marketed upon the Internet by its creator Max Burns, it is a claim which has led to schism in British ufology of seismic proportions. The case has highlighted the fundamental dichotomy which exists today between the 'scientific' and 'belief-driven' approaches to the study of UFOs and illustrated the lengths to which the latter are prepared to go to promote claims which are, as the dictionary defines myth, 'untrue...or without foundation.'

Max Burns and 'the Sheffield incident'

...I believe the British Government are test flying a 30-50ft triangle around the Northwest of England...probably built with recovered ET technology. These [sic] larger triangular craft are I believe without doubt extra terrestrial in origin. As well as that I will go so far as to say that these triangles are being flown and controlled by the beings known as the 'Greys'...

Max Burns |5|

Max Burns appeared suddenly on the British UFO scene during the mid-90s, claiming a long interest in the subject which stemmed from a childhood 'abduction' experience. At this time he worked as a disc jockey in South Yorkshire night-clubs and spent his spare time communicating with fellow 'abductees' and believers via the rapidly expanding UFO subculture on the Internet. Burns quickly endeared himself to those subscribing to the more paranoid and extreme belief systems with his investigation of what he began to call 'Sheffield incident' and links he claimed to have discovered between symptoms suffered by 'abductees' and chronic fatigue syndrome or ME. Unlike many of the other Walter Mitty characters who are temporarily attracted to the ufological stage Burns had the confidence to pursue his arguments to the bitter end, even after it became apparent that the weight of evidence was stacked overwhelmingly against him. His answer to critics who questioned his evidence and conclusions was simple: anyone who disagreed was part of the 'cover up' or was working for the Security Services. At one stage his plausible and garrulous manner was enough to persuade even cautious members of the UFO community, including the council of the ailing BUFORA, that he had a case to answer.

Late on the night of 24 March 1997 Burns had been alerted to an event on the Peak District moors west of Sheffield which was to become the turning point of his career in ufology and would ultimately prove to be his nemesis. What he was later to proclaim as 'Britain's answer to the Roswell UFO crash' could have been lifted straight from a plot in The X-Files or one of the trashy satellite TV UFO 'documentaries.' The so-called 'Sheffield incident' - a misnomer as the events actually occurred above Howden Moor - appeared to have all the ingredients necessary for myth making: callers jamming police switchboards to report an unidentified aircraft on a collision course with the hills, military jets skimming rooftops, strange aerial explosions, a massive search operation which found nothing, claims that a cover-up was underway and the run-of-the-mill denials by the authorities.

The facts of the case and the fantasies which have been spun from its meagre strands are summarised elsewhere. It is sufficient to say that the original events stemmed from what South Yorkshire Police concluded were 'a combination of circumstances that would lead people to believe a plane might have crashed.' [6] These circumstances involved the sightings of a low-flying light aircraft which coincided with reports of an anomalous aerial explosion or sonic boom created by a military aircraft. At no stage were UFOs ever seriously considered by the authorities as having played a role in these events, although a covert military exercise was certainly suspected as a possible explanation by a number of senior police officers. Mysteries, however mundane, leave a vacuum which is easily filled by the imaginations of UFO believers. When news of the mystery reached the media, the region soon became the focus of attention from assorted 'investigators' who immediately cried out: 'Cover-up!'

Among these early visitors was Max Burns, who seized upon the mystery explosions as a key part of his developing theory which sought to explain what really happened that night. In the short-lived newstand magazine *Alien Encounters* Burns posed the following question to readers in the summer of 1997: 'Could this have been the UFO making a crash landing, or a Tornado crashing after being attacked by the UFO?' [7] Soon evidence was being collected to fit the theory; where this didn't exist it was simply invented. Testimony and facts which did not support the UFO hypothesis were simply ignored, as passive consumers of the story on the Internet would not feel it was necessary to question Burn's belief-driven version of events. By 1998 Burns felt confident enough to conclude the case was 'one of the biggest UFO incidents in recent years involving a huge Flying Triangle...and evidence of a conspiracy on behalf of the civilian and military authorities to hide the facts from the public...' [8] In summary the 'Sheffield incident' had become the Secret Truth resurrected in a new form, suitable for a modern, unquestioning audience.

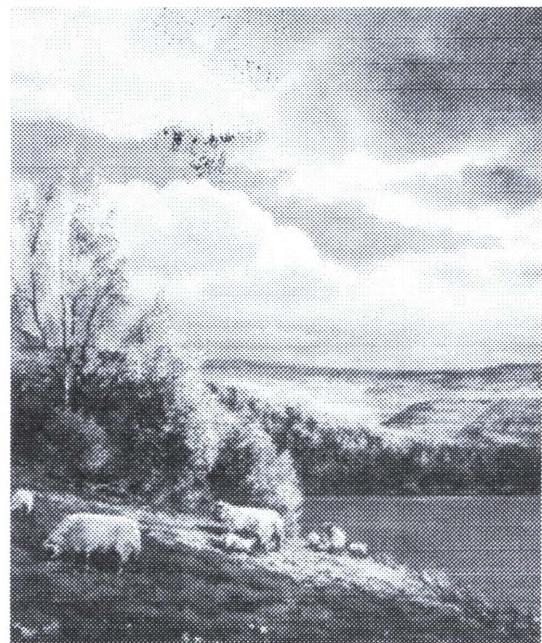
Burn's claims did not involve the standard scenario of a

crashed ET craft recovered by a covert military operation. Crashed 'flying saucers' and their Michael Rennie-like occupants were a thing of the past in '90s UFO lore. In the increasingly convoluted logic employed to 'sell' the case, it was argued that a more fashionable triangular ET craft had been pursued across the Pennines by military fighter aircraft, which were either escorting the aliens or had been diverted from an ongoing exercise to intercept the intruder. A key element of the case were the sonic booms recorded by the British Geological Survey. They suddenly became the 'evidence' Burns was looking for. Following his logic, during the encounter at least one of the pursuing Tornado jets was 'completely destroyed' or captured as a result of hostile action by the pilots of the 'triangle.' The aerause of the use of EM weapons While being in close proximity of the Triangle.' [9]

The 'lost Tornado' story has a long pedigree in the history of ufology and science fiction. Indeed, one of the strongest motifs in the UFO crash mythology is the belief which can be summarised as 'one of ours was lost chasing one of theirs.' Ever since the tragic death of US pilot Thomas Mantell during the pursuit of a 'flying saucer' over Kentucky in 1948 (which turned out to be a high altitude Skyhook balloon) there have been frequent claims of hostile mid-air encounters between the military and ET [10]. The Mantell case and a similar incident involving the loss of a Lightning over the North Sea in 1970 have recently been resurrected by 'alien investigator' Tony Dodd in a sensational and breathless account of his attempts to 'blow the lid' on the UFO cover-up. In 1987 attempts were made to link the crash of a Harrier jump jet in the Atlantic with the mystery 'crop circles' over which the pilot allegedly flew before disaster struck [11]. The same kind of motifs can be traced in science fiction genre, from the era of War of the Worlds to the gung-ho battles between US pilots and hostile alien invaders depicted in the '90s blockbuster *Independence Day*. Coincidentally, Burn's claims about the 'Sheffield incident' appeared in the same year that the BBC screened the low-budget science fiction drama Invasion Earth which ironically began with a dogfight between an

RAF Tornado and a UFO along the British coastline.

One of the elements of Brunvand's 'crashed Martian' folk legend concerns the setting of the alleged UFO crash in an isolated desert region, away from prying eyes. This tradition has also been developed effectively in science fiction films and programmes, in particular *The X-Files* and has filtered down into UFO mythology. In 'the Sheffield incident' the covert operation took place above one of the few regions of Britain which might actually be termed a 'desert.' The High Peak District of northern Derbyshire was an ideal substitute for the arid regions of New Mexico. The story continued the tradition of a covert recovery operation in a remote area where acres of moor hid the 'the secret truth' from the public. In this case it was easy for Burns to depict the Dark Peak, above which the 'incident' took place, as being miles away from human habitation. Although conditions can be treacherous for those who venture into the mountains unprepared, the Peak District is in fact the most popular National Park in Britain with a staggering 20 million visitors in 1999. Readers of Burn's case on the Internet will not easily appreciate that the area where the 'Tornado crash' supposedly took place is actually within walking distance of Sheffield city centre. The moors themselves, although lonely, are little more than 40 square miles in total area and cannot be described as 'remote' in the US sense of the word. Throughout the year the Derwent Valley is thronged with tourists, walkers and climbers who enjoy exploring every inch of the Dark Peak moors, which are sandwiched between two of the most heavily populated conurbations in the north of England. In addition, the region lies directly beneath an international air corri-



Howden Moor

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The High Peak of northern Derbyshire was an ideal substitute for the arid regions of New Mexico



Sheffield City Centre

Readers of Burns' case on the Internet will not easily appreciate that the area where the 'Tornado Crash' supposedly took place is actually within walking distance of Sheffield city centre.

directed away from the scene of the secret operation which he believes was launched to remove evidence of the Tornado crash. The sighting of 'a military Land Rover' and the activities of the 'Aero Space Intelligence' were invoked as evidence of the presence of a covert military retrieval team in the area that night. The AIS, according to Burns, 'look like the CID' and 'drive twin aerial cars' during their missions to silence witnesses [12].

The 'Tornado pilot'

The most ludicrous evidence of all was that provided by a young man who had been a passenger in a minibus which had been flagged down by a mysterious stranger on a deserted stretch of the A57 Snake Pass near the Ladybower reservoir. The stranger, clearly described as being 'Asian' or 'Pakistani' in appearance, smelled strongly of diesel or petrol fumes. He asked for a lift into Sheffield, but this declined because the bus was full. The witness reported this 'suspicious' incident to the police and thought no more of it until he was contacted by Max Burns, who by now was desperate for a 'breakthrough' to shore up his collapsing theory. Burns - posing as 'a journalist' - could not believe his luck when the young man, who had since joined the RAF as a trainee flight engineer, told how he was now certain the 'diesel or petrol' he had detected that night was actually 'aviation fuel.' Within hours the shocked engineer found himself being questioned by a reporter from the

dor used by airliners using Manchester's Ringway airport, and is regularly used for low-flying practice by a number of military airfields.

To overcome these credibility problems Burns had to devise a scenario where he could claim that the police and civilian search and rescue teams had been di-

News of the World to whom Burns had tried to sell his story. He immediately realised his words had been taken out of context to promote a sensational UFO fantasy and demanded the story be dropped for fear of the effect it could have upon his reputation and his new job. It was too late now for Burns had the initial conversation on tape and armed with this evidence and the subsequent retraction, now had the 'proof' he was looking for that a witness had been forced through fear or coercion to retract his statement. Here was clear evidence of the 'cover-up' he had suspected all along, for if the story was nonsense why go to all this trouble to stop the witness talking?

In his 'Sheffield incident' Burns uses this yarn to confidently proclaim that the mysterious stranger was 'without doubt the co-pilot of the Tornado jet, who was soaked in aviation fuel and was making his way to the nearest metropolis to alert the military.' Having parachuted from the stricken aircraft, the crewman had walked four miles to the reservoir viaduct before trying to thumb a ride with a passing bus. Not surprisingly, even members of the pro-ETH camp found this claim particularly hard to swallow. Nick Pope summarised the conclusion shared by many when he wrote: 'It's ridiculous to suggest this has anything to do with the RAF, on the basis that a pilot from a downed jet would always stay at the crash site, waiting for the inevitable military search and rescue operation. He'd be wearing a distinctive green flying suit that even a layman would realise was military issue.' [13]

The identity of the stranger was in fact already known to the Peak Park Ranger office and to Derbyshire Police, if only Burns had cared to ask. The report was investigated by the force as a possible suicide attempt and patently had nothing whatever to do with a 'crashed Tornado,' except in the imagination of a UFO buff.

In truth, if any military cover-up had been in evidence it would have been obvious to the 141 members of the civilian Mountain Rescue Service who spent more than 15 hours in freezing cold temperatures combing the moors for signs of an air disaster. They found nothing, and saw no one. So confident of his theory

was Max Burns that he did not feel it necessary even to contact the MRS Commander Mike France to enquire if any evidence existed to support his theory. Questioned on the role of the Mountain Rescue teams on a live Internet debate on the case, Burns claimed they were 'not in the area of the crash' and had been 'sent off on a wild goose chase by the Government/authorities.' [14] Earlier he was forced to admit he had never spoken to any member of the highly experienced search and rescue teams and had no basis upon which to cast doubt upon their search and rescue skills which save dozens of lives every year.

Burns has repeatedly accused the Ministry of Defence of organising a massive cover-up of the 'Sheffield incident.' He claims they have changed their story at least four times in relation to the part played by the military aircraft reported over the Peak shortly before the alarm was raised. In March 1998 and on my behalf, the Labour MP for Sheffield Hillsborough, Helen Jackson, quizzed the MOD in a series of written Parliamentary questions relating to the role of the military in the events [15]. They admitted somewhat reluctantly that a 'pre-booked training exercise' did indeed take place above the Peak District on the night in question, with photo reconnaissance aircraft flying as low as 250 feet above the Derbyshire hills. Throughout this saga, the MOD have consistently denied the 'incident' was triggered by jets being scrambled from a front-line fighter base to intercept a UFO. There is no evidence to suggest their statements - provided in response to direct questions in the Houses of Parliament - are anything but correct [16].

In point of fact the RAF regularly use the northern Peaks as a practice ground for low-flying training for its pilots which intensifies significantly during the build up to international conflicts such as the Gulf Crisis. This is in fact a tradition which dates back to the use of the Derwent Dam and Ladybower reservoir by the famous 617 'Dambusters' squadron during the preparation for their attack on the German Ruhr in 1943. Since that time the Dark Peak east of Manchester has become a graveyard for more than fifty planes and their crews who have fallen foul of

the unpredictable weather which prevails above this part of the hills. The tragic loss of these aircraft have added to the reputation of the Dark Peak among pilots and rumours have spread concerning a 'ghost plane' which has been seen skimming the surface of the reservoir and dams [17]. Sightings of the 'ghost flier' have triggered a series of fruitless searches by police and the mountain rescue service, the latest as recently as the summer of 1999. One Peak Park ranger has revealed how the service receives up to four reports of 'crashing aircraft' from visitors to the region on average every year. This information places the 1997 incident into context as one of many 'false alarms' caused by low-flying aircraft in this part of the Peak. Rangers and search personnel have become so accustomed to these alarms that they have begun to realise how many of the reports are based upon sightings of 'real' aircraft, both military and civilian, observed under unusual conditions. Visitors unfamiliar with the Peak District often fall victim to an optical illusion whereby aircraft in their landing approach to Manchester 'appear' to be at dangerous low altitude as a result of the height above sea level of the observer. From the evidence available, there is no reason to suggest that the events of that spring evening in 1997 cannot be explained through a combination of misperception, misidentification and plain wishful thinking on behalf of the UFO myth-makers.

Conclusions?

Fact, common sense and logic are unlikely to halt the development of the Howden Moor mystery into a fully fledged cause celebre of the 'Roswell' tradition. Facts and close scrutiny of the evidence may have solved the case to the satisfaction of the majority, but as with Roswell the 'story' will continue to live on in mythology. Simply because bizarre claims cannot be disproved, they must therefore have some basis in reality as part of the twisted logic employed by Max Burns and his apologists.

No amount of testimony or evidence will convince those who have made it their mission to defend the preposterous claim that human life was lost as a result of a hostile attack by UFO occupants.

Even if it were possible to account for the safety of each and every Tornado aircraft and its crew in service with the RAF and NATO, it would always be claimed that the 'loss' had been cleverly erased from official records by the nefarious agents of the omnipresent cover-up. Already the signs of madness have surfaced among promoters of Max Burn's theory with the appearance of ever more bizarre beliefs, including claims that drinking water levels 'fell dramatically' in the Ladybower reservoir following the appearance of the 'Flying Triangle' or that a secret portal to another dimension lies hidden beneath the reservoir complex! The standpoint of 'believers' cannot fail but to lead along a path on which madness and paranoia lurk around every corner. No final conclusion will ever be accepted except one bound up with conspiracy, cover-up and the elusive 'secret truth.'

Unfortunately, there can be no real conclusion to the Howden Moors 'crash'; no clean ending which will allow the case to be tied up and neatly filed away. That is, of course, unless Max Burns and his followers can come up with hard physical proof that a Tornado was shot down by a UFO. I predict this will never happen. The carcass of facts surrounding this case has now been picked clean by legions of believers in the literal truth of UFOs and the case now lives on, Jackanory-like, in the tellings and re-tellings of people who have chosen never to concern themselves with the primary and secondary sources of information. They have chosen which pieces of information and whose research best suits their beliefs and prejudices and are blind to the realities of the case. Worse still I and other rational researchers associated with the case have been demonised as 'agents of the Government' in an attempt to divert attention from the truth at the heart of the matter.

The Howden Moors case has, like the Roswell Incident, a life of its own within ufology. All we can do now is chart its trajectory across the ufological landscape, smile sagely and wonder at the capacity of humans to create such a fanciful edifice from so very little.

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15. *Hansard*, written questions, March 23, 1998; MOD written answers, March 25 and April 7, 1998.
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17. David Clarke, *Supernatural Peak District* (London: Robert Hale, 2000).

Fantasy and fact: a Howden Moor checklist

Max Burns' case is centred upon the claim that a Tornado fighter aircraft was 'lost' with the death of at least one of its crew members during an encounter with an Extraterrestrial spaceship over Sheffield and the Peak District on the night of 24 March 1997. Two years after what Burns has called the Sheffield incident he has not produced one single piece of evidence to support his theory. The 'evidence' mustered in support of the UFO claims is summarised below, with the facts in italics following each significant point:

There were five witness to 'an enormous triangle' over Sheffield and the Peak District. Three of these saw the triangle either being escorted or intercepted by six military jets. The triangle had been flying low to avoid radar detection. [Only two witnesses described seeing a triangle and just one of these reported the observation to the police. This related to a sighting from a moving train more than two hours before the events which sparked the search operation, almost 30 miles away from the scene! The second sighting also took place many miles from the search zone, and the witness is a close female friend of Max Burns. Her observation clearly related to the flight path of low-flying military aircraft.]

A further six witnesses saw a 'glowing orange' UFO, military jets and 'unmarked helicopters'. One pensioner who said she observed a cigar-shaped object really saw, according to Burns, the triangle from the side so that it would appear cigar-shaped.

[RAF jets were involved in a low-flying exercise above the Peak District between 7pm and 9.35pm which accounted for the majority of the sightings before 10pm. An unidentified light aircraft was operating in the Sheffield area between 9.45 and 10.30pm, sparking the later sightings reported to the police as a plane crashing into the moors. Two search helicopters were flying sorties above the 'crash' zone from 11pm and would appear unmarked when seen in darkness!]

The first air explosion (at 9.52pm) was not a sonic boom at all according to Burns. In reality it was the Tornado jet exploding as a result of hostile action by the crew of the Flying Triangle. The second boom, at 10.06pm was the UFO escaping



from the area (14 minutes later?) [The British Geological Survey and aviation experts conclude that the recordings made that night are the characteristic 'N-waves' produced by a military aircraft smashing through the sound barrier (760 mph/1,220 kph at sea level). A senior seismologist gave his opinion the pressure wave was caused by an aircraft, probably a military aircraft, reaching supersonic speed possibly while performing a mid-air turn]

The stricken Tornado jet crashed into the moors north of the Howden Reservoir or plunged into one of the nine reservoirs Northwest of the Ladybower Viaduct near the A57 Snake Pass road.

[No trace of a wrecked aircraft was found either by the extensive ground search or from the air with the use of sophisticated heat-seeking equipment specially designed to locate fire and body heat from above. A Tornado jet would have left an enormous crater and burning debris scattered across a wide radius of the crash which could not have been missed. Teams of workers from Yorkshire Water checked the reservoirs but found no signs of the telltale wreckage or oil slick which would have sparked a major drinking water pollution alert.]

The co-pilot of the Tornado bailed out seconds before the destruction of his aircraft. Having parachuted onto the moors he walked three miles to the Ladybower viaduct whilst soaked in highly flammable aviation fuel. He was spotted at 11pm by passengers in a minibus thumbing a lift 'to the nearest metropolis to alert the military'. [This was the most bizarre theory used by Burns to support his claims. The incident it related to had in fact no connection at all with the 'aircrash' mystery. The man reported by the occupants of the minibus was an Asian motorist covered in petrol or diesel fuel, a fact confirmed by Peak Park and police officers. The case was investigated as a possible suicide attempt.]

A radar operator with the Royal Signals at RAF Linton-upon-Ouse (North Yorkshire) told a friend early on the morning of 25 March that he had tracked a UFO on his screen over the Peak District for a ten minute period beginning at 9.55pm the previous night. Later he was warned not to discuss the case 'as if I do I will be in breach of my national security oath'. [Operationally RAF Linton was closed on the night of 24 March. In any event, the base radar has a limited radius within the immediate

area and is used as part of the training of rookie pilots in Tucano aircraft. No one has spoken to the mysterious radar operator other than a friend of a friend of Max Burns.]

The Ministry of Defence made an announcement to the media that a Bolide meteor exploding in the atmosphere caused the sonic boom and was also responsible for all the reports of the crashed plane. [The MOD have never made any statement to this effect. Their position remains that the reports of the low-flying aircraft were a matter for the police and that the cause of the sonic booms remains a mystery]

The seven Mountain Rescue Teams were ordered to search a zone four miles from the area the explosion was heard in and it wasn't until 8am on 25 March that four men were sent to search Strines Moor, near the 'crash zone'. According to Burns, the search teams were not in the area of the crash 'and I don't think they know anything.' In summary, he claims the rescue teams were deliberately misled while a covert military team removed the wreckage of the Tornado jet from under their very noses.

[Burns has never spoken to any of the PDMRO commanders to ascertain the facts and has used unreliable testimony from the wife of a gamekeeper who played no part in the operation. The highly experienced team of volunteers from the PDMRO were placed in charge of the search operation by police at midnight on 24 March and it was they who directed officers and helicopter crews from that point onwards, based upon triangulated sight-lines provided by the initial eyewitnesses. The commander, Mike France, said an extremely thorough search of the 40-50 square mile zone, including Strines Moor, was completed without any evidence of a crash being found. None of the mountain rescue personnel, police, fire fighters or media who were present saw any evidence of military activity other than the presence of the RAF Sea King which they had requested for assistance in the search.]

An enormous cover-up was launched following the incident, designed to confuse the issue with 'cover-stories' (drug runners, ghost planes, Bolide meteors), a 'dirty tricks' campaign to discredit Burns himself and a D-Notice to prevent the Press from discussing the case. [The case has been discussed extensively in local newspapers, in TV documentaries on BBC 1 and Granada and on the Internet. No evidence has emerged to support the

claim that a Tornado jet was lost, or that UFOs were ever involved in the incident.]

Key witnesses in the case have been forced to retract their testimony or have changed their statements as a result of threats from MI5 and their agents, including the author of this article.

[Witnesses have not changed their testimony, but have been deliberately misquoted by Burns and his supporters. One witness who Burns claimed had seen 'a huge triangular object' hovering over the moors denied ever having made such a statement when approached by two other independent investigators. Another 'uncorroborated source' named as having seen the RAF Sea King pulling body bags from a reservoir was never interviewed by Burns. This man denied having ever having made the claim. A third witness told investigators: 'UFOs were never mentioned until Max came to the pub and started asking us about it.]

Max Burns was 'set up' with drugs planted by the Security Forces or MI5 because of 'what he knew' about the Sheffield incident

[Burns was found guilty of possession and supply of Class B drugs by the majority verdict of a jury at the end of a four day trial at Sheffield Crown Court in September 1999. He is currently serving an 18 month jail sentence. Burns did not use the claim that he was set up by MI5 in his defence during the trial, but a former friend of the DJ told the jury Burns was 'obsessed' with UFOs and aliens.]

Sources:

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The Media and the Paranormal

A Sceptic's View by
Dr Christopher French

Dr French is the head of the Psychology Department at Goldsmiths College, London

This is the winning entry in the second essay competition in memory of Roger Sandell.



rial for the session pointed out:

The relationship between the media and psychical research has always been rather ambivalent. On the positive side, the media provide a valuable means of educating the public, a useful source of anecdotal material, contact with potential psychics and the opportunity to do experiments with a large number of subjects or to conduct surveys. On the negative side, the need for the media to entertain rather than conduct rigorous investigations often produces a somewhat sensationalised view of the paranormal, and this can be frustrating for the serious researcher.

I agreed to present the sceptic's perspective on this relationship, as I am one of a few British sceptics who appear fairly regularly on the media commenting upon paranormal and related claims. This essay is largely based upon my presentation to the SPR. In the first half of the essay, I will consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of the roles of believer and disbeliever in media contexts. In the second half, I will

Introduction

A few years ago, I took part in a Study Day organised by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) on the topic of "The Paranormal and the Media". As the publicity mate-

discuss the issue of bias in the media, with particular reference to the series, *The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna*.

I should begin, however, by outlining my own personal perspective on the paranormal. I am generally unconvinced by evidence put forward in support of paranormal claims. However, I cannot deny that most people do believe in at least some aspects of the paranormal and a sizeable minority claim to have had direct experience of the paranormal. As a psychologist, therefore, I am faced with a challenge. Why do so many people believe in the paranormal and what might underlie ostensibly paranormal experiences if in fact paranormal forces do not exist? One possibility is that certain situations may wrongly be perceived by the observer as only being interpretable in terms of paranormal forces where in fact normal physical and psychological explanations may be quite adequate. This is clearly only a working hypothesis, but it is one which I feel is much more powerful in explanatory terms than is generally appreciated. Whether it is powerful enough to account for all paranormal claims only time (and further research) will tell. It might come to pass that parapsychologists will establish beyond all doubt that paranormal forces do exist. Perhaps the autoganzfeld studies are an important step in that direction (Bem & Honorton, 1994; but see Milton & Wiseman, 1999). I will wait and see. In the meantime, I will continue to investigate plausible

non-paranormal explanations for ostensibly paranormal experiences. If it turns out that I am wrong and paranormal forces really do exist, I do not feel that the approach I am taking will have been invalidated. There is no doubt at all that the majority of experiences which people explain in paranormal terms are in fact nothing of the kind, as most serious parapsychologists would readily acknowledge. If my research helps parapsychologists to sort the "real thing" (if there is such a thing) from the convincing illusion, then it will have served a useful purpose.

My research interests fit reasonably well with the declared purpose of the SPR which is to "examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis." I say "reasonably well" advisedly. I do not believe that it is possible to approach paranormal issues "without prejudice or prepossession". We all, whether we admit it or not, approach such issues with our own preconceptions. Indeed, one of the central topics of my own research is the effect that belief and disbelief have upon the interpretation of ostensibly paranormal phenomena. On paranormal issues, as with other issues, our beliefs bias our interpretations in predictable ways. This does not mean that our beliefs cannot change of course. In my own case, I have moved from unquestioning belief to extreme scepticism and slightly back again.

I believe passionately that the best way to decide the issue of whether or not paranormal forces exist is by carrying out scientific research under tightly controlled conditions

cientific research under tightly controlled conditions. Although not perfect, this is the best means that we have of controlling for our own inevitable biases. Therefore, I strongly support good mainstream parapsychological research.

Many of the issues that I have just raised are relevant to a discussion of the relationship between the media and the paranormal. There is little doubt that the media play an important role in influencing the level of belief in the paranormal. In general, I will concentrate upon the role of television and radio in dealing with the paranormal, but many of the same issues are relevant to the treatment of such matters in newspapers and magazines.

There are various types of programme to be considered. Probably the most frequently broadcast are the audience participation programmes such as, in Britain, Kilroy, Vanessa, Esther, and The Time, The Place, and those regional programmes aimed primarily at the late-night viewer who has just returned from the pub, with titles like Late and Live.

I would like to feel that I am now best described as a moderate sceptic although I am sure that I struck many members of the SPR audience as anything but moderate. I would put that down to the biasing effect of their beliefs of course!

I believe passionately that the best way to decide the issue of whether or not paranormal forces exist is by carrying out sci-

The level of debate on the latter can be summed up by the fact that the programme-makers themselves will often openly tell you that they are aiming for something like "Oprah Winfrey on speed". It is clear that such programmes cannot hope to provide any serious in-depth treatment of paranormal topics.

The nearest radio equivalent to this type of format is the phone-in with a few experts in the studio. In my experience, the latter is often an altogether more civilised affair and can even be quite productive if enough time is devoted to a topic. The problem is that the only time that a couple of hours will be devoted to a paranormal topic is likely to be between midnight and the early hours - not exactly peak listening times.

Then there are the serious documentaries. Given the nature of the paranormal, these may fit into either the scientific category, such as Equinox or Horizon, or the broadly religious category, such as Heart of the Matter and Everyman. In my opinion, these types of programme often provide the best treatment of paranormal and related issues. This probably reflects the fact that the programme-makers are able to devote more than a couple of days to making the programmes and those involved are often proud of the generally high quality of their programmes. Furthermore, the issues are considered with respect to broader scientific or religious contexts, adding depth to the treatment.

Over recent years, in Britain, we have been deluged by a host of series devoted more or less exclusively to the paranormal, including: Michael Aspel's Strange but True? (with its ever-so-unbiased question mark at the end of the title), Schosfield's Quest (in which members of the public were asked to help solve paranormal mysteries). The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna (about which, more later), Secrets of the Paranormal (produced, surprisingly, by BBC2's Community Programme Unit), and Mysteries (presented by the ubiquitous Carol Vorderman). Needless to say, sceptics get a little annoyed by the generally uncritical treatment of the paranormal in such programmes. In some cases, even when sceptics are featured, the

presentation can still be somewhat biased as I will show later.

The fact that programme-makers have bothered to contact informed sceptics at all is an indication that they wish to give at least the appearance of balance. It is clear that some programme-makers have either never approached informed sceptics or else completely ignored their advice. A case in point would be the Beyond Belief programmes hosted by David Frost, Uri Geller and Matthew Manning. As Polly Toynbee commented in the Radio Times, "Beyond Belief was a well-titled programme, but here its merit ceased".

In contrast to the numerous pro-paranormal series that have been broadcast recently, I can remember only one series ever with a decidedly sceptical approach to the paranormal and that was James Randi: Psychic Investigator, broadcast in 1991. There have been a few memorable one-offs, such as the excellent Equinox programmes on The Guru-Busters and Secrets of the Psychics, and a superb Horizon on the Bermuda Triangle many years ago, but the fact is that such programmes are few and far between.

Believers vs. Sceptics

So, what then are the relative advantages and disadvantages of being presented in the media as either a "believer" or a "disbeliever"? One clear advantage that the informed sceptic has over the informed believer is that of rarity value. Quite simply, there are very few people who are deeply interested in things that they do not believe in, but usually several dozen available informed believers for each paranormal topic. For me, paranormal claims are worth studying whether or not they are valid. If they are valid, then this is of profound importance in that it suggests that the current scientific world-view is mistaken or at least incomplete in major respects. If they are not valid, then study of such claims can tell us a great deal about the human mind, in the same way that studying the perceptual errors produced by visual illusions can tell us a lot about visual processing in general.

Because of the relative scarcity of informed sceptics, one can find oneself presenting the sceptical perspective on a wide

range of issues, from angels to zombies. OK, I admit that I've never done a programme on zombies, but I've done yetis so that gets me most of the way through the alphabet. I did consider at one stage having some cards printed with "RENT-A-Sceptic" printed on them (with the emphasis on "RENT"). I considered adopting the slogan, "You name it, I'll doubt it", but I thought that some people might think I was being serious. It is largely thanks to our rarity value that informed sceptics appear as frequently as we do on the media. Thus when I arrived to present a lecture on my own research to the SPR, I was greeted at the door by a distinguished SPR member with the somewhat sarcastic comment, "I thought you were dead. I hadn't seen you on TV for three days."

A problem which is faced by the sceptic but not by the believer is what one might call "tokenism". By this I mean the tendency of some programmes to feature a token sceptic for whatever reason. This can take a variety of forms. On occasions I have taken part in programmes which were essentially PR jobs for various psychics with little attempt at any critical evaluation of the claims presented. Such programmes are dominated by the psychics, who are given star billing up on the stage, with the help of a supportive presenter. The opportunity to express any doubts from one's seat in the audience can be very limited. I have also taken part in programmes where there was simply no need for an informed sceptic as the psychic claimant being featured was clearly deluded. I do not see it as my role to ridicule such individuals whose claims are unlikely to impress even the most fervent believer. Such programmes leave a bad taste in one's mouth. The subtlest form of tokenism is that where every effort is made to give the appearance of an unbiased presentation but where there is in fact definite bias. The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna is a case in point which I will deal with more fully later.

Sceptics and believers often come across as stereotypes on TV programmes. This is partly because the stereotypes are true to some extent. If I am doing a discussion programme on astrology and I learn that I will be sitting

next to Professor X, an astronomer from the University of Y, I can be fairly sure that he will be on my side. If I find a place name with a single, often exotic, name, such as Zelda or Darius, I can guess which side they will be on. Their flowing robes and crystal amulets are also something of a give-away.

Depending upon the presenter, sceptics may find themselves cast in the positive role of "the voice of reason" (with the totally unjustified implication that anyone who believes in the paranormal must be a little bit crazy). On the other side of the coin, the sceptic can be presented as cold, scientific and uncaring. Believers in the paranormal are often embodiments of New Age thinking. They are emotional, intuitive and warm. They really are (usually) very nice people. Once again, there is some truth in these stereotypes although like all stereotypes they can be overplayed. The belief system of the true believer is usually rather more positive than that of the sceptic. The basic message is that we all have amazing powers and that the soul will survive bodily death. In contrast, the standard sceptical position is that we are all made of essentially the same stuff as everything else in the universe and death is simply the point at which biochemistry turns into chemistry. In terms of emotional appeal, there is simply no contest. I sometimes find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to argue against the possibility of life after death to an audience containing many individuals who sincerely believe that they are still in touch with their dear departed. Whilst this is not a position that I enjoy, the bottom line is that science is about truth not happiness - and it seems quite likely to me that our true position in the scheme of things is not necessarily one with which we would be very happy.

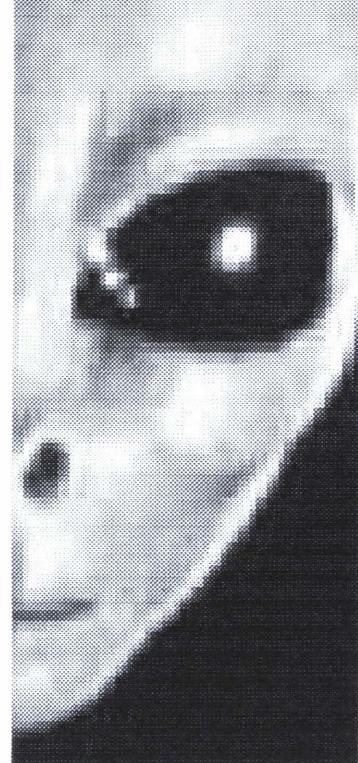
Although the world-view of the believer is in general more emotionally appealing than that of the sceptic, there are important exceptions. For example, one might assume that most people would prefer a world which did not include alien abductions or poltergeists. In my experience, however, it is often the case that claimants in such cases are very unwilling to consider even the possibility that their experiences might have a non-paranormal ex-

planation. There are several possible reasons for this, but one fairly important one is probably that such individuals are likely to feel special as a result of their experience, even though they may genuinely be frightened by it. After all, they would not have got to appear on television without it.

The presenter of the programme is usually the most important factor in determining which side appears to have the best arguments. Often the presenter will remain resolutely neutral, but not always so. If the presenter is rather sceptical, one's job is made very easy. If the presenter is a true believer, the sceptic will have a hard time. I remember on one occasion doing a programme on UFOs and being told just before I went on that the presenter was a keen UFO spotter. Predictably, I had a hard time.

If a presenter is biased towards the believers' position, there are various ways in which the sceptics' position can be undermined. For example, the believer has one very real advantage over the sceptic which the presenter might emphasise in various ways, and it is this. Just because someone believes that some paranormal claims are true does not mean that they therefore accept all paranormal claims. The believer can therefore often be presented as someone who judiciously weighs the evidence in each individual case before coming to a conclusion. I have yet to meet a believer who did not claim that they themselves approached each case critically. They are hardly going to say "Me, I just believe everything I'm told", are they? The sceptic, on the other hand, starts from the working assumption that all cases have non-paranormal explanations. It is not hard to see how this can be presented as pure prejudice on the part of the sceptic. Partly to counter this, I will usually try to emphasise the fact that most responsible parapsychologists will readily admit that most claims are best explained in prosaic terms. The cases where disagreement arises between sceptic and believer are therefore a very small minority. The difference between the two sides is that the believer accepts those few cases as proof of the existence of paranormal forces, whereas the sceptic believes that there will inevitably be some cases where human ingenuity is not ca-

Individuals are likely to feel special as a result of their experience even though they may genuinely be frightened of it



A problem faced by both the sceptic and the believer is one that might be referred to as the "with-friends-like-these" syndrome. There are times when I shudder to hear the comments of other sceptics featured in these programmes.

interpretation of that experience. Just because a person who has had a near-death experience genuinely feels that it was the most real and profound experience of their lives does not prove that their soul really left their body as they believe. Psychologists are all too familiar with cases of delusional belief systems of the most bizarre kinds that are all held with absolute conviction.

Another problem faced by the sceptic is the reliance in such programmes on numerous anecdotal accounts as opposed to any considered appraisal of well-controlled studies. The latter is clearly not going to attract the same viewing figures as lurid personal accounts. I am often surprised at how weak the accounts presented on discussion programmes are given that they have been selected from dozens of people telephoning the programmes in response to an appeal for suitable cases. When faced with such personal accounts, one has to simply assert that one cannot really comment on them as one has usually only just heard of them. In

pable of figuring out the true explanation. Another way in which an audience can be made to feel hostility towards a sceptic is by setting the sceptic up as some arrogant know-it-all who is dismissing experiences that they have never themselves had. The point here is that informed sceptics are rarely rejecting the alleged paranormal experience itself, they are questioning the

most instances, no proper investigation has been carried out by anyone. Sometimes, of course, one might be reminded of a similar claim which was properly investigated and accounted for. Many programmes will include a couple of cases which have been investigated and pronounced genuine, in which case one should try to do one's homework in advance, in order to find out if the case is really as strong as it appears. Often it is not.

A problem faced by both the sceptic and the believer as one that might be referred to as the "with-friends-like-these" syndrome. There are times when I shudder to hear the comments of other sceptics featured in these programmes. There is no doubt that the strongest evidence in support of paranormal claims deserves to be taken seriously and is not easily dismissed. It is all too rare for this type of evidence to be included in discussion programmes but when it does crop up, it does the sceptics' cause no good if some uninformed bigot simply rejects it on the grounds that "It's just not possible!" The other type of sceptic that I dread is the kind that has a blanket explanation for all paranormal claims, e.g., all claimants are liars, all claimants are mad, all claimants are stupid. This is clearly not the case and such a sceptic is merely demonstrating their own ignorance. Unfortunately, most sceptics are very uninformed regarding the paranormal. Another kind of sceptic that worries me is the type who will believe any non-paranormal account, no matter how far-fetched and unsupported by the evidence, rather than consider the possibility that paranormal forces might actually exist. I imagine that my feelings towards such sceptics are somewhat similar to those of the parapsychologist who receives the support of some audience member who asserts that they know that telepathy exists because that is how they communicate with Zog, the pan-dimensional being that lives in their fridge.

The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna

At least with live programmes one does not have to worry about the role of the editor. The way that a programme is edited can, potentially, completely distort what actually happened. I want to finish

by giving several examples of biased presentation from the series The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna. My reason for focusing upon two programmes from this particular series is that I took part in both programmes and was disappointed, although not altogether surprised, by the final product.

The first of the two programmes in question to be broadcast dealt with telepathy. One of the demonstrations featured Albert Ignatenko from the Ukraine who demonstrated a so-called "psychic punch". The sequence of events as seen by the viewer at home involved the presenter, Paul McKenna, asking for a volunteer from the audience. From the raised arms, one individual was invited to take part. Mr McKenna explicitly asked the volunteer to confirm that he had not met Mr Ignatenko before that day which he did. Mr Ignatenko moved the young man gently forwards and backwards in order, he claimed, to prepare him to receive his psychic energy. He then walked away, stopped, raised his arm and the volunteer fell back onto a mat.

This demonstration, on the surface, might look impressive to some. It appeared that a volunteer had been more or less randomly chosen from the audience and within a couple of minutes a complete stranger had used some kind of influence, perhaps psychic, in order to make this healthy young man fall over. For those of us in the studio for the rehearsals, however, a rather different version of events was apparent. The same young man had taken part in the rehearsals earlier in the day. He had spent an unknown amount of time with Mr Ignatenko during the day. For all we know, he may have been selected for his high level of suggestibility, in much the same way that stage hypnotists select volunteers. To ask for a volunteer from the audience when you know in advance who is going to be picked and to then get that person to confirm that they had not met the psychic before that day might reasonably be seen as intentionally trying to create a false impression in one's audience without actually lying. It may also be worth noting that Paul McKenna's main claim to fame in the UK is as the country's most popular stage hypnotist.

Also in the programme,

Pam Smart from Lancashire and her dog Jaytee were featured. Jaytee, it was claimed, knows when Pam is about to return home even if no one else in the house knows and the time is randomly determined. Jaytee moves to the window at the time when Pam sets out on her return journey and sits and waits for her. A film clip featuring Jaytee contained several errors, all of which resulted in the claim appearing to be more impressive than it actually is. I am grateful to Richard Wiseman for drawing these to my attention. The programme showed a clip from a test of Jaytee carried out by Austrian TV, in which Jaytee is clearly seen moving to the window seconds after Pam sets off for home. As Richard pointed out on the programme, it is important to see the rest of the film to know how many times the dog goes to the window anyway. When Richard raised this issue during rehearsals he was informed by Paul McKenna, perhaps relaying information from the production team, that the rest of the tape had been viewed by the programme-makers and that the dog had not moved to the window previously. In fact, no one had seen the footage.

Furthermore, the voice-over said the dog is always correct. It isn't. The voice-over also said that Pam was six miles away from the dog at the time of the test. In fact, she was down the road, between half and three-quarters of a mile away. This caused Pam considerable embarrassment when facing her neighbours all of whom recognised the locations featured. The voice-over also incorrectly stated that she had been away for five hours. Richard's source for this information was Pam Smart herself, who was fed up with the way the claim was portrayed. Since that programme, Richard and his colleagues have tested Jaytee in a controlled manner - and found no evidence for canine paranormal powers (Wiseman, Smith & Milton, 1998).

The other programme that I featured in dealt with psychic detectives. The programme included pieces about Dorothy Allison, the New Jersey psychic, and the British psychic Nella Jones, famous for her apparent accuracy in coming up with information relating to the Yorkshire Ripper, Pe-

ter Sutcliffe. All of my specific criticisms of Dorothy Allison's claims were edited out. The criticisms were generally in terms of the need to look not only at the apparent hits of the psychic detectives but also at their failure rate if one is to stand any chance of reliably assessing their true level of performance. I had made similar points against Nella Jones when we both appeared on the chat programme, Esther. I pointed out that she had claimed that Peter Sutcliffe could and did pass himself off as a woman. She simply denied this, attributing these claims to the late Doris Stokes, another British psychic. I was somewhat wrong-footed by this - I seem to remember a member of the audience shouting "Get your facts right!" - although, with presenter Esther Rantzen's help, we did finally get Nella to admit that she had only ever drawn the Yorkshire Ripper as clean-shaven. In fact, he had a full beard throughout the period of the murders (which would make passing himself off as a woman slightly problematic!). Subsequently, with Mike Hutchinson's help, I was able to track down the actual piece in the *Psychic News* where Nella had indeed made the claim she later denied. I had the piece with me when I went along for the McKenna programme and I asked the programme-makers if they would let me confront her with it. I thought it would make good television. They didn't. The final version of the programme was basically nothing more than good uncritical PR for Nella.

I was also in the studio during the rehearsals for the programme on psychokinesis. This included one demonstration in which the audience was asked to use their combined psychic ability in order to influence a random event generator which would determine how two computer-scrambled pictures would unscramble. The final outcome would be either a picture of a tiger or an astronaut. Given that there was a 50:50 chance of either outcome, this was clearly not going to say much one way or the other regarding the audience's PK ability. The audience chose to concentrate on trying to make the astronaut appear, but after a couple of minutes the picture of the tiger appeared. Amazingly, it was decided to simply have another go!

On this occasion, according to my recollection, the astronaut appeared fairly quickly. To no one's great surprise, the viewers at home only got to see the successful outcome. However, it appears that some clever editing has been used to combine the start of the first trial with the end of the second. The overall impression is that the audience had managed to use their combined will-power to produce the desired outcome even though it initially appeared to be going in the wrong direction.

I hope by now I have given enough examples to illustrate the bias in this particular series. In addition to all these specific examples, as so often happens, the tests carried out on psychic claimants were generally poorly controlled and extremely limited in terms of the conclusions that could be drawn from them. It is for reasons such as these that sceptics are often cautious in accepting at face value presentations on television. TV producers have to be concerned about viewing figures and therefore are often more concerned with entertainment value than careful critical analysis. There is a general consensus amongst programme-makers that I have met that paranormal programmes are more entertaining than sceptical programmes. I am not sure that they are right, but they are the ones who decide what kind of programmes get made. I think that moderate researchers on both sides of the debate would welcome programmes that dealt with strong evidence for the paranormal with the seriousness that it deserves.

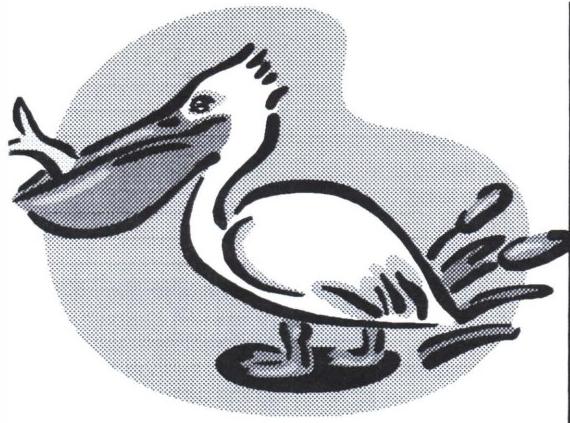
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The Pelican writes... ■



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The Pelican has been wondering, somewhat disingenuously, how it is that different accounts of the same UFO incident can give the reader very different impressions as to what really happened.

Take the famous incident of 17 April 1966 when Dale Spaur and Barney Neff chased either a UFO or the planet Venus - depending on which version you read - across part of Ohio and into Pennsylvania. The Pelican has indulged in some ufological exegesis on two accounts of the incident, a credulous one by J. Allen Hynek (1) and a sceptical one by Robert Sheaffer. (2) Together they serve only to deepen the mystery rather than providing enlightenment.

So far as the Pelican is concerned, the biggest mystery in this case is: Why did Spaur and Neff chase the UFO - or what they thought was a UFO - in their car? Hardly any ufologists express surprise when they hear of cars chasing UFOs, so perhaps the problem needs to be spelled out clearly. If police officers in a helicopter spot a stolen car then they can easily follow it and relay its position to officers on the ground, who can then arrange to intercept it. On the other hand, if police officers in a car spot a stolen helicopter they would not be able to chase it very far because a car is constrained to follow the roads, but a helicopter can easily move in any direction. Attempts to use a car to chase any airborne object would be useless, as well as endangering other road users.

Well, given that the two officers were crazy enough to at-

tempt to chase something in the sky, what could they have really been chasing? According to the believers, they must have been chasing a UFO because there were a few other reports of the object having been seen. Sceptics insisted that Spaur and Neff had been chasing Venus. Sheaffer says that the sky at the time of the incident was "quite clear", but does not give the source of this vital piece of information. Hynek does not mention the state of the sky.

As the UFO was seen in the east when the chase began, Sheaffer says that if it really was a UFO the men should have seen two objects - the UFO and Venus. But surely he means three objects? Hynek says: "On that morning Venus was just a few degrees to the upper right of the moon." So, surely, if the men started chasing Venus, would not the fact that it remained in the same position relative to the moon tend to destroy the illusion that it was something moving through the atmosphere? Neither Hynek nor Sheaffer discuss this problem.

Anyway, Spaur and Neff were chasing something which, Sheaffer decided after studying their accounts of the incidents and a map of the route they took, remained in the eastern sky, rising slowly throughout the chase. Sheaffer thus concluded that they were chasing Venus, because it was very bright and in the east at the time. Or was it the moon? How could they have failed to notice it if, as mentioned above, it was close to Venus? It is all very puzzling to the poor old Pelican.

However, if someone saw the object, from a different vantage point, being pursued by the police car, then it must have been a Genuine UFO. It so happened that Officer Wayne Huston was monitoring the radio conversation between Spaur and his office in Ravenna. Huston was at East Palestine, Ohio, where he saw the object when the pursuing police car was still about five miles away. He said: "As it flew by, I was standing by my cruiser. I watched it go right overhead. It was shaped something like an ice cream cone with a sort of partly melted down top. The point part of the cone was underneath; the top was sort of like a dome. Spaur and Neff came down the road right after it. I fell in behind them."

This is taken from Hy-

nek's review of the case. Sheaffer manages to give an entirely different impression, by rubbishing Huston's testimony. He writes: "It can be shown, however, that Huston's account of the object's approach is internally inconsistent. Huston claims that he first sighted the object when cruiser P-13 was about five miles away. But he told Weitzel that the UFO appeared to pass overhead in a matter of seconds, leaving him little opportunity to observe the object. If Huston actually did spot Floyd when it and its pursuers were reportedly five miles away and if the object's speed did in fact match P-13's 80-85 m.p.h. velocity at this point, Huston would have had the object in view for at least three and a half minutes."

So, did Huston underestimate the time the object was in view and thus get a good look at it, or did he just get a fleeting glimpse and thus get a false impression of the details, or was he telling a pack of lies? This is where we need a good investigator. Both Hynek and Sheaffer rely heavily for their accounts on the work of William Weitzel, who investigated the case for NICAP.

According to Hynek: "Much credit must go to William Weitzel, instructor in philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh, Bradford Branch, who with care, industry, tact, and persistence brought together the many details of this Close Encounter account."

Sheaffer is less impressed. "Unfortunately, Weitzel's enthusiasm for the UFO phenomenon caused him to overlook some obvious inconsistencies and, worse still, to be blind to significant changes in the witnesses' stories as time passed."

Both Hynek and Sheaffer agree that the case was not properly investigated by Project Blue Book, which was at that time headed by Major Hector Quintanilla. As Sheaffer puts it: "There was in principle no reason that Quintanilla could not have launched an in-depth investigation into the sighting, and after a period of weeks or months he might have produced an entirely satisfactory explanation for every major aspect of the sighting. But the news media pressure was on."

Thus, in the absence of a proper Blue Book investigation the task was left entirely to amateurs, who no doubt had their own axes

to grind. But apart from any criticisms of their efforts, this case raises another important issue - the question of the reliability of eyewitness testimony.

Sheaffer's technique in dealing with UFO reports is to doubt the accuracy of testimony whenever acceptance of it would leave sightings unexplained. In his book *The UFO Verdict* he devotes a chapter to discussing the problem of witness reliability, but much of the inaccurate reporting he mentions seems to arise from the fact that the witnesses did not know what they were looking at.

However, he gives as one example the crash of a de Havilland 110 fighter at the Farnborough Air Show on 6 September 1952 in which 28 spectators were killed and 60 injured. He quotes the writer Stephen Barlay who said that of the thousands of eyewitness reports received only one letter was of some use and that most witnesses "got the split-second time-sequence of disintegration backwards, filled in bits with imagination, and preferred theories to reports". (3)

But the Pelican has discovered another, probably more reliable, account of this air crash investigation written by the man who was given the task of examining the wreckage, aircraft engineer Fred Jones. (4) Jones gives the true reasons for the disappointing reports from spectators. "In the event . . . it transpired that fewer than a dozen witnesses had told stories that coincided with the now known facts of the disintegration. They all described correctly what they had seen but, by a quirk of circumstance, all those thousands of people saw the accident only after it started, and the few who did get it right were over near to Cove Radio Station, and nearly under, or to the starboard side of, the aeroplane as it approached the aerodrome." Jones was looking for evidence of what happened at the start of the incident and eventually obtained it from a cine film taken by a professional cameraman. An important point to consider is that many witnesses were not in a good position to see exactly what happened. Even more important is the fact that it all happened so quickly. The starboard wing started to buckle, then the wing was torn off and the aircraft disintegrated. Jones remarks: "All this takes time to describe, but it actu-

ally occurred in less than half a second." The Pelican wonders how many readers could accurately remember a fairly complex sequence of events presented to them unexpectedly, and lasting for only half a second? No, this is not a good example of witness unreliability.

Back to the great UFO chase. Can we make any sense of it? Not much; there are too many loose ends, and accounts of it have become too distorted by either credulity or scepticism, though, as Sheaffer says, we would have a satisfactory explanation if it had been competently and impartially investigated at the time.

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Letters to the Pelican

Dear Pelican,

You say that "Pelicanists prefer a scientific approach, whereas the other lot entertain fantasies about the space people and their saucers", and, further, that "they make a habit of ignoring or brushing aside mundane explanations which have been offered."

Fair enough, but I query the implicit assumption that mundane explanations are scientific. The core problem is that science deals with testable hypotheses. When you are dealing with a report of a past event that will not be repeated, then strictly speaking no explanation is scientific, because it does not lead to any verifiable predictions. Thus, the psychosocial hypothesis might indeed be fairly dubbed 'literary criticism'; on the other hand, so too can the extraterrestrial hypothesis. So long as we only have UFO *reports*, then 'scientific ufology' will remain a contradiction in terms.

Best Wishes,
Gareth Medway, London SW7

BOOKS EXTRA

Peter Rogerson discovers that John Mack's cultural relativism has a curiously limited range.

John E. Mack. *Passport to the Cosmos: human transformation and alien encounters*. Crown Publishers, 1999. £22.99.

In his new book John Mack has abandoned any facade of science to present what is in effect the outlines of a new neo-Pagan religion in which environmentalism, abductionism and a world of living powers or spirits form major components. Short on actual facts but long on syrupy phrases it might indeed be the first serious attempt at a fully fledged Disneyworld religion.

Mack's version of how this all came about would be quiet worrying if true; it is that his exploration of the abduction experiences forced him to choose between the western world view and his 'clinical experience'. Heaven forbid that there could be anything wrong about his 'clinical experience' or judgement, therefore the Western world view had to go. I suspect things were more complicated than that.

Central to his latest presentation are the claims of three so called 'tribal shamans', Bernardo Peixoto, Sequoyah Trueblood and Credo Mutwa. All three however are deeply socialised into Western society, and I am not at all convinced that the spirits they are summoning are not those of Carlos Casteneda, Grey Owl and Princess Caraboo. What they are selling is clearly not traditional wisdom but at best a syncretisation of parts of traditional cultures with a large dose of Western new-agery and popular culture. In a way they would resemble the prophets of previous revitalisation movements who sought to fuse elements of their traditional culture with elements of mission Christianity. Today the New Age and popular entertainment have replaced Christianity as the icons of the western world. Of course the previous generations of revitalisation movements were aimed at the spiritual transformation of their own society, the new generation are marketing their product at the vast legions of First World intellectual masochists.

Most controversial of

these characters is Mutwa, denounced as a fraud and an "apartheid regime apologist" in his own country. Mack's venture into the politics of South Africa is one of breathtaking condescension and naivete, and might easily give the impression that he is a racist, who believes that the 'natives' should stay loyal to tribal tradition, and not mess with the white man's ways such as commodity broking and surfing the Internet. Of course this is just what the apartheid regime was about in its project to 're-tribalise' the black African community (by 1950 the processes of Christianisation, inter-marriage and urban migration had considerably blurred tribal identities and the masses increasingly saw themselves as citizens of South Africa, demanding civic rights, education, and an end to segregation, which was a threat to white power and privilege, so stooges like Mutwa were hired to aid in the process of divide and rule). For the price of 'retribalisation' you only have to look at Bosnia and Kosovo, as well as the too many places in Africa where the politics of ethnicity have been played. It doesn't seem too impossible to imagine a parallel universe in which the likes of Mack would have been praising Radovan Karadic as a 'preserver of traditional culture'.

Like most western multiculturalists, Mack doesn't apply the ideology to himself, there is little sign of him seeking to return to traditional Jewish culture, say joining a Hassidic community. On the contrary his neo-Paganism marks a decisive rejection of the Jewish tradition of divinity being reserved exclusively to the transcendent creator God, with matter being a created substance. Nor is there any sign of him leaving his nicely appointed tenured office at Harvard to live in the AD1000 house, with no mod cons and no modern medicine, or in a Neolithic

Book Reviews



Dealing with this situation is going to be the litmus test for British ufology

Peter Hough. *Visitation: the certainty of alien activity.* London House, 1999. £6.99

This book is published as part of a series entitled 'Adventures: Life Options for Today', which seems to be one of those 'how to enhance your life' series. Well, if you really want to enhance your life, you could do no better than not reading this book, for what starts as a typical credulous potted history of UFOs, descends towards the end into what is arguably the bleakest abduction book yet. Indeed I am not sure you could get any bleaker.

Hough's theme is the absolute sovereignty of 'the aliens', not in this case your nuts and bolts, strawberry ice cream loving ET's, but boggarts from the Pit of Hell..., oops I'm sorry parallel dimensions. Not content with abducting people, giving them cancer, mutilating their animals - and maybe themselves as well - they own us and control us totally. No longer do the aliens just invade our airspace, our gardens, our homes (through solid walls of course), and our bodies, but they invade our thoughts, dreams, imaginations. They are in our heads. they can do anything, they control everything and their is absolutely nothing we can do about it.

Past societies may also have imagined themselves besieged by the forces of darkness, but they could put on the armour of faith, or work powerful magic, or use the burning glass of reason to dispel the night. Hough offers no such consolations, not only does he lack faith in religion, reason or magic, he sees them just as part of the vast illusion perpetrated by the all-powerful other. Indeed human beings themselves are the creatures of the other, a genetic

experiment gone wrong, people in fact "have become a cancer on the Earth".

As you can see our Peter is not exactly a little ray of sunshine, hardly the sort of company you would necessarily want in the pub after a hard day at the office.

Of course, all of this can be viewed with the correct psycho-social detachment. We can see these fantasies as an expression of a *fin de siècle* atmosphere of helplessness and despair. We can see that the omnipotent alien other is in some sense a metaphor for the indifference of the cosmic process by which worlds, galaxies and universes are born and die in their trillions. We might also see this contemporary sense of helplessness as an expression of many people's feelings of being swept along by the forces of globalisation and social change. The idea of being the property of something which controls our very imagination reflects a real sense in which we are the property of global, corporate, capitalism, which indeed controls our imagination to a certain degree through the mass media.

Now if Hough were just an armchair UFO writer, we could perhaps leave it there, though I would still find the pushing of such extreme negativity very disturbing. But he is not, he is an active abductionist, and one who in violation of most British ufologists' code of ethics uses 'therapists' to regress people. What this means is exemplified by the following passage: "Mary [an abductee] did not want to believe..(the abduction) was true. At one point she begged us to tell her it was just a fantasy, a nightmare that had spilled over into her waking life. In all honesty we could not do that." (pp.121-2).

Hough and his therapist offer no hope, help, advice, nothing. Poor 'Mary', hung out to dry, in the end constructs her own balm, a fantasy in which the abductors are nice and have been looking after her since she was a child. Hough proceeds to kick that last prop away. This isn't therapy, its more likely bloody sadistic abuse, mental rape. But then how much compassion are you going to waste on 'a cancer'.

Now I have to declare a personal interest. Several times in the past I have referred potential UFO witnesses to Peter Hough, I may have thought he was a bit credulous, well most ufologists are I suppose, but basically a sound enough chap. Now I look at that truly appalling passage, and have the awful sinking feeling that by doing so I may have contributed towards wrecking, perhaps ending someone's life. For, from the portrait that emerges from this book, this 'basically sound chap' is arguably one of the most dangerous abductionists in Britain today. I do not know Peter Hough personally, so cannot tell whether he has got himself into the state where he really, 'really', believes what he writes, or whether he is operating in a sort of half belief for the thrills, or simply writes stuff like this to increase his bank balance. Others who know him better must make that decision, and perhaps take action on the basis of their knowledge.

Yet it scarcely matters for if, one way or another, Hough conveys to the people who come to him - some of whom at least, will be genuinely frightened and vulnerable - explicitly, or implicitly, just a portion of the litany of helplessness, despair and misanthropy which emerges this book, I fear sooner or later he will have a

sue or worse on his hands.

Dealing with this situation is going to be the litmus test for British ufology. Hough cannot be written off as some isolated maverick, as a close colleague of Jenny Randles, chair of one of the most respected local groups, he is pretty much part of the ufological establishment. British ufology must condemn this book, and Hough's involvement with 'abductees' with a single, stentorian voice, take what ever steps are necessary to make sure he cannot push this sort of poison down the throat of another frightened, vulnerable person, remove him from the subject completely and to do what it can to offer genuine help to those he may have injured. If British ufology lacks the will, or capacity to act, then we will have to look to others, including official agencies, who have.

Yet, will just dealing with one isolated person be enough? Hough may be an extreme example, but he is far from unique. It seems to me that ufology as a whole as become increasingly obsessed with every nastier fantasies of violence, helplessness, despair, misanthropy and paranoia. The days of watching out for spaceships in warm summer skies, seem so very far away. Should we not now think the unthinkable, and wind up the whole subject before it does any more damage and wrecks anymore lives, be they 'investigator' or 'witness'? At very least, I am confirmed in my belief that once you start invoking non-human intelligences of unknown nature and arbitrary powers to explain strange experiences and anomalous phenomena you are on the start of a very slippery slope of superstition indeed. Peter Hough, judging from this book has reached just about rock bottom of that slope. Others are on the way. If ufology is to continue it must be on the basis of a cast iron rationalism.

All book reviews are by Peter Rogerson except where stated. Other reviews, not included in Magonia, can be found on the Magonia On-Line website:
www.magonia.demon.co.uk

Kevin D. Randall. *Scientific Ufology: how the application of scientific methodology can analyse, illuminate and prove the reality of UFOs.* Avon Books, 1999. \$12.50.

My colleague John Harney has been on at the supporters of the ETH to produce a list of cases which they consider to be good evidence for the ETH, Kevin Randall is too savvy a character to do that directly, instead he has produced a series of cases which he considers to be of scientific worth, and too easily explained away by sceptics. They are: Portland Oregon, July 4 1947; Levelland (groan); The Washington radar-visuals of 1952; Minot North Dakota r/v October 14 1968; Lakenheath; The Montana movie 1950; The Tremonton movie 1952; The Macminville Photographs 1950; Trindade Island Photographs 1958; The Hefflin photographs 1965; Socorro; Delphos; Chiles-Whitted; The Utah Nevada meteorite April 18 1962; The Zond reentry of 1968.

The first thing that we notice about this list is that the latest entry, Delphos, is nearly thirty years old. Every one is from a previous generation, most from the Blue Book files. This is now standard fare among American ETHers. In order to find really interesting cases they have to go to the much derided Blue Book, an admission that the investigations by the ufologists themselves are largely worthless (or that they are unable to obtain any information from their colleagues, or perhaps having forked out a substantial amount of cash on the Bluebook Microfilms they now intent to milk them for all they are worth)? Whatever the reason the result is that these old cases are essentially beyond reinvestigation.

While some of the cases are generally conceded to be among the more puzzling, others seem to have been dragged out of the IFO limbo where even far-from-sceptical ufologists had been prepared to leave them. To resurrect the Chiles-Whitted case, generally now conceded to be a misperception of the trail of a meteorite, Randle has to convert a fairly obvious bolide which went across Nevada and Utah in 1962 into something mysterious, and to argue that witnesses to the Zond satellite re-entry in Tennessee who reported a single object with win-

dows, had not seen the satellite, but a UFO that just by coincidence happened to be in the skies at the same time. Presumably this could be settled by seeing whether other people saw, and interpreted correctly that satellite re-entry from nearby locations, or simply whether in principle anyone in their location should have been able to see the re-entry, in which case if there was a UFO present as well, they should have seen both.

The reason for Randle's scepticism on this point is that he performed an experiment in which people were shown a video tape of a streak of light, and none saw a lighted UFO. But the numbers here were much smaller than in nature. The Zond IV re-entry, and the April 1962 bolide are not the only examples in which bolides or satellite re-entries have given rise to a number of quite extreme descriptions. Jenny Randles has published several from this country. The reason is a Bell Curve of misperception. If say 10,000 people witness a bolide, perhaps 1,000 will think they have seen something really strange, 100 will report a UFO. 10 will report an exotic craft performing fantastic manoeuvres, and one will report that it landed in their back yard and aliens got out and abducted them. As 9,900 do not report anything, ufologists confront perhaps the 100 who do. They then say that as these hundred people were puzzled, and of them ten reported manoeuvres no bolide could perform, then it must have been an alien craft, and the hundred 'witnesses' provided confirmation for the abduction!

Randle goes out of his way from time to time to say that being unidentified does not mean extraterrestrial, but his language often belies that caution. He uses the word 'craft' for example, when what is reported are often just luminosities. There are also arguments from folklore, as in the car stoppages, or the light dimming during the 1962 bolide pass, where he evokes the EM effect. But the EM effect is a piece of ufological folklore not a scientific fact, and if you dispute this show me the experiments, reported in peer-reviewed mainstream literature in which anyone has stopped a car, or performed any of the other ufological EM feats by means of electromagnetic fields, and left not a lingering trace behind

It probably is true that the sceptics often get it wrong, that the particular explanations often hurriedly trotted out may not be the correct ones, but this still does not entitle the careless use of terms such as craft, or assumptions that 'cannot identify' equals ETH.

Because the ETH is both very unlikely, for a variety of scientific reasons, and essentially irrefutable, it should be put to one side until and unless proof positive in the form of the production of a specimen of organic tissue having no genetic relationship to any terrestrial organism arrives. In fact all explanations involving non human intelligences should be removed from the discussion, at best they represent a hopeless cul-de-sac of empty speculation, at worst the most appalling and potentially destructive superstition.

Constance Clear. *Reaching for Reality: seven incredible true stories of alien abduction.* Consciousness Now Inc, 1999. £12.99 pbk

Therapist and social worker Constance Clear introduces yet more abduction accounts, the majority of which have clearly been influenced by the abduction folklore and to have been re-normalised by hypnotic regression. The majority of these accounts seem to revolve around episodes of sleep paralysis and hypnagogic hallucination, compounded by other psychological problems, for which the myth of alien abduction has become a symbol and an attempted solution

More interesting is the story of Maggie, a middle aged Puerto Rican woman, whose narrative retains much more of the motifs and features present before the introduction of the alien abduction scenario. Her experiences revolve around protean sleep analysis/hypnagogic hallucination experiences, with the potential to turn into either ghost stories or indeed child abuse narratives.

Recently John Rimmer and I discussed as to whether there were people who had children (or indeed as adults) had actually seen Santa Claus. Maggie is one such person, remembering at Christmas time when aged about 9 "looking out my bedroom window and seeing Santa Claus and his reindeer passing across the sky". Does anyone know of anything similar?

One of the biggest controversies to muddy the waters of British ufology in recent years came when veteran political activist and anti-fascist campaigner Larry O'Hara exposed Tim Matthews as the former Tim Hepple, a man with a complex history of activity in extremist political movements. Here Peter Rogerson reviews O'Hara's pamphlet and tries to make sense of a maze of rumour and counter-rumour.

**Larry O'Hara and Steve Booth
At War With the Universe. Notes from the Borderland Pamphlet No.1. £6.00 (obtainable from Larry O'Hara, BM Box 4769, London WC1N 3XX)**

Having to review this pamphlet was a sad and poignant occasion because it reminded us here in *Magonia* how much we miss Roger Sandell, who would have been the only person with the political knowledge who could have made sense of a lot of this for us all. In the circumstances one does ones best.

The proven facts in all of this are that ufologist Tim Matthews of Southport, was once named Tim Hepple, and said Hepple has had a chequered - to put it mildly - past. By his own admission, (or claim) he was a soccer hooligan, member of the neo-Nazi British National Party, later became involved with a group called the Green Anarchists, while rejoining the BNP to spy for the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight*. Also apparently fairly well established is that he edited, or helped edit a magazine called *White Resistance*, the house journal of a neo-Nazi group called the Church of the Creator. All this seems clear, and there are documents reproduced to back up the claims.

The authors go on to claim that in these course of most or all of these memberships Hepple was in the habit of urging other people to more extreme action than they would have otherwise have contemplated, but when the going got really tough Hepple was nowhere to be seen. But the

police were, and on several occasions other people were charged, but Hepple seemed curiously immune from prosecution. In particular, it is argued that Hepple was in the van of urging the Green Anarchists to develop a cell-like structure, and ally themselves with the Animal Liberation Front (to our American readers: think of abortion clinic bombers, but substitute animals for foetuses), which led several of those involved being convicted for conspiracy, but not Hepple, or a guy who was going to call Hepple as a hostile witness for the defence.

On this basis, and on Hepple's on-and-off claim to have been in army intelligence, the authors claim that he is an agent, of a monolithic abstract metaphysical entity called 'The British State'. There is to date, however, no independent evidence that Hepple was in the army, or if he was, he was not kicked out pretty quickly as he has claimed on one occasion, either because of his membership of the BNP, or perhaps a more or less mutual agreement that the British Army just wasn't violent enough for him.

Beyond this we enter into the murky world of far left (or self-perceived far left) politics, and the incomprehensible rivalries of its various factions. One of these is a war of words between *Searchlight* and a variety of left-wing groupuscules some of which O'Hara represents. The following is based on memories of conversations with Roger Sandell some years ago, so don't take it as gos-

pel but a flavour of what the more esoteric parts of the allegations about Hepple are about. Basically *Searchlight* takes - or took - the view, that anyone who even so much as breathed the same air as a member of the far right, fairly broadly interpreted, was thereby an errand boy of the fascists. As O'Hara had actually interviewed members of some of these groups in the course of some research he was therefore an errand boy *par excellence*. At the same time *Searchlight* have been taking strenuous efforts to present themselves as the 'respectable' face of anti-fascism, and have been only too willing to work with the establishment, including the intelligence services to that end. Scurrilous rumour also has it (please note: I am not saying whether this is true or not, I have no way of knowing) that *Searchlight*, some of whose members were orthodox communists, were only too willing to help the security services to, er, shall we say inconvenience, their rivals on the far left.

Similarly, to O'Hara and company anyone who breathes the same air as a member of the intelligence services is a 'State Asset', which is a very bad thing indeed, because to him 'The British State' is almost as big an enemy as the neo-Nazis. Because *Searchlight* co-operates with the intelligence services, it is thus a major 'State Asset' and a very very bad thing indeed. So if Hepple gives information on Nazis to *Searchlight*, he is a 'State Asset', which is almost worse than being a Nazi. From now on Hepple grows in importance, he is not just a State Asset, he is an *important* one, so important that the Shayler affair is concocted to draw attention from Hepple's difficulties with O'Hara.

Now why should such a powerful State Asset devote himself to the sad, murky world of gutter-roots ufology? Well some semi-coherent reasons are given, but which fail to convince. While it might make sense to use alleged low-level agents like Hepple to infiltrate semi-clandestine groups, anyone can join a UFO club. Who needs Hepple when you have Admiral Hill Norton as vice President of BUFORA? I mean if Hepple was an intelligence agent. Norton is the sort of guy to whom Hepple's handlers' bosses, bosses, boss would salute and say 'yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir'. I sup-

pose though if you have someone you would really prefer to keep a low profile, but just refuses to, ufology is as good a place to hide them as any. After all, once the word ufology is mentioned, serious investigative journalists run a mile.

Now, no doubt, as they go round investigating unidentified flying objects, holding sky watches, etc. ufologists are bound to find out things the intelligence services would rather not have found out. So a low level surveillance is likely to be required. But would a halfway sane intelligence service employ a Hepple to infiltrate a group of solid middle class burghers and a bunch of teenagers - a guy whose activities draw attention to himself and antagonise everyone in sight? Of course not; you choose someone who is unfailing quiet and courteous, goes out of his way never to really offend anyone, and earns general respect; but who lets it be known on occasion in an understated way, that he knows a thing or two worth knowing. I mean to be honest you could probably join some of these clubs and announce you were from MI5, but they wouldn't chuck you out, they'd crowd round for your autograph, and pat themselves on the back that they're the ones who have 'someone really important' on board. Just feed them a scrap or two of the 'I've been out East and seen a thing or two' routine and they'll eat out of your hand.

In the second part of the study there is an analysis of Hepple's involvement with ufology, which at least shows his rapid changes of views and allegiances, par for the course perhaps, but it is the speed, weeks and months rather than years which spring to mind. There are a number of allegations made, but the evidence as opposed to assertion is none too strong, and its clear than at times the authors are quite out of their depth in the world of ufology.

This is manifested not only in their willingness to believe that everything that goes wrong is the result of Hepple's machinations: Eric Morris was causing trouble before the big H came on the scene, but they apparently believe that ufologists are a bunch of rather fey, quiet folks, whose vicarage tea party world had been rudely interrupted by 'the thug Hepple'. How wrong can you be.

Poor old Larry O'Hara clearly came to Matthews' Southport Conference in 1998 to be martyred to the cause, and Hepple obligingly responded by leaping from the platform making various threats. Kevin McClure intervened before there could be serious violence, and O'Hara was pushed out with no more force than is seen many a weekend in pubs and clubs the length and breadth of Brigantia, and though mildly upsetting, was certainly not 'a serious brawl' (i.e. no chairs were thrown at the platform, there were no snooker cues, baseball bats or broken beer mugs involved). Given the real injuries suffered by many anti-fascists over the years, O'Hara's attempt to portray this fracas as the second battle of Cable Street is overwrought and in rather poor taste. While some members of the audience, mainly members of the general public in attendance, were upset, others were rather disappointed that the 'serious brawl' hadn't broken out, and others were clearly waiting for Jenny Randles to come round with pencil and paper, believing that what they had witnessed was a staged demonstration to test observation and recall.

O'Hara had badly fouled up his own operation, not only by giving Hepple advance notice of his intentions, but then leaving his actual presence to the late afternoon, allowing Hepple most of the day to spin his version of events and portraying O'Hara as a demented stalker giving Hepple's poor father a heart attack, and horror of horrors, breaking into his parents' coal shed, turning even those members of the audience who might have been sympathetic to O'Hara against him. A much better O'Hara tactic would have been to give absolutely no hint of attending, and using a friend or colleague who was quite unknown to Hepple, to ask some question, which while sounding quite innocuous to the audience would have seriously rattled Hepple's cage. The audience reaction would then have been very different. As it is, with enemies like O'Hara, who needs friends?

There is also an embarrassingly naive paragraph on other radical rightists in ufology, trying to argue that Hepple is almost unique, with the only other British figures counting being Patrick Harrington who printed a couple of

issues of BUFORA's *UFO Times* about eight years ago, and George Spurgeon, ousted by yours truly back in 1996. Erm, excuse me folks haven't we forgotten something here? That as President of the organisation, BUFORA proudly raised aloft the figure of Patrick Wall, arguably the most racist and reactionary post-Suez Tory MP of them all, a far more powerful and sinister character than the Big H. You might think that an organisation which accepts a notorious racist as its President wants watching, but I couldn't possibly comment. Then there is the editor of *FSR* Gordon Creighton, who goes round telling people that UFOs are run by card carrying communist demons, and produces editorials on his crusade against the peace movement. Previous editors have included an employee of the South African apartheid state, a right wing ex-Liberal parliamentary candidate, an hereditary peer who varied his campaigns on behalf of the space brothers with support for the Smith regime in Rhodesia, and an aviation historian who had at least a touch of the intelligence department about him. We could go on and on, and we have done so at length in the past. I could also mention how many UFO and fortean groups gave publicity to a 'conspiracy conference' a few years ago, in which one of the main speakers was the notorious anti-Semitic Eustace Mullins.

It would be unfair to say that all the ufology in this booklet is bad, the piece by Robert Booth on the Nazi saucer myth is really good. OK, Andy, he failed to detect the *Sonderburg* hoax, but I have to confess that one would have slipped past most of us, me included. But this guy knows his technology and his aviation. Alas this was his downfall in the animal liberation affair. If you, as an intelligence agency, have got it into your heads that a group of people are going to set up a terrorist cell, who do you target? An intelligent, obviously highly technically competent, disciplined former member of the RAF, who if he were that way inclined could construct some serious nasties, or a dropout music student? Got it in one folks. Booth makes an important point: when you have a former member of the British National Party writing a book arguing that UFOs are descended from the amazing magical

technology of the Germans, an argument known to be used by Nazi groups, then one must ask the question 'how ex is ex?'

At the end of reading this booklet, my feeling is that, if Hepple was the 'state agent' that the authors claim, then I would be rather less unhappy about ufologists accepting him as a colleague than I actually am. Because, like it or not, it may be necessary to do some pretty unpleasant things when dealing with the wildest shores of politics, and it would imply a degree of consistency, rationality and responsibility in Hepple's conduct that I am not convinced is there.

What is really worrying is that ufologists had leapt to Hepple's defence in a knee-jerk reaction, without stopping to think or even address the questions posed in this booklet. Do you really want someone as a colleague, about whom even one of his more staunch defenders (who has now revised his opinion - see Editorial), Andy Roberts, says he wouldn't believe anything he said about his past? In which case, why believe anything he says about

anything? This is a guy with a murky past, which gives rise to the suspicion that he may be a fascist with a penchant for violence, and perhaps for negotiating his way out of trouble at the cost of colleagues. He's someone who was clearly a highly controversial figure in ufology before all this stuff hit the fan. Ufology is in enough mess (being polite) already, without importing other people's and shovelling it over our heads. I have a sense of *deja vu* when hearing of Hepple's adventures. We have been here before. Remember Bryan Jeffrey and his tales of infiltrating the British Movement, and the wild goose chases he sent us on implicating just about everyone in the APEN affair, which almost certainly he was running himself? Do we want to go through all that again?

I have to say that seeing the brightest and best in ufology being taken in by Hepple, makes me wonder if we can really ever rely on ufologists as judges of character (Sadly Booth and O'Hara can't take the high ground here, having been taken in the absurd Armen Victorian).

Peter A Sturrock (study director). *The UFO enigma: a new review of the physical evidence*. Warner Books, 1999. £22.19.

This book is the mass market edition of the Sturrock Report which was reviewed by John Harney in Magonia 64. The publishers hype that this is the "first major scientific enquiry since the Condon Report" is manifestly untrue, for the inquiry consisted of a bunch of scientists sat on their backsides listening to some of the same old suspects spinning the ETH or similar line. For the commercial publication the book is padded out with a series of articles from the *Journal of Scientific Explanation* and a reprint of part of Jenni Zeitman's 20 odd year old study of the Coyne helicopter report.

Sturrock is forced to concede that the panel members were not greatly impressed by what they heard and some threatened to walk out after the first day because they felt the presentations were poorly prepared and presented (no doubt our old friends the upside down, out of focus slides put in an appearance), while the presenters found the panel members were "overly critical and academic" - translation: they asked awkward questions.

With a bit of arm twisting they stayed the course, and agreed, when offered a trip to San Francisco to reconvene and come to a conclusion. Yet more arm twisting seems to have been needed to get an agreed conclusion. This was of the 'interesting if true, but where is the real evidence?' and 'well, yes as long as there unexplained observations its always possible something of scientific interest may come out of it' variety, nothing one could disagree with there. What the panel report was not, despite a positive gloss put on it by Sturrock, in a sort of reverse Condon, was the ringing endorsement of 'really existing UFOs' and the ETH, and reports to the contrary in some UFO circles suggest how far from reality some ufologists fantasies are.

Most of the submitted pieces look fairly naive, and in many cases one could see why the panel was not impressed, and one gets the feeling that if this was supposed to be the best evidence from the best researchers, then the cupboard is very bare indeed.

Hold the Back Page



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Down in Bracknell Forest Something Stirred

Something strange seems to be happening in British local government, and it's not all down to Tony Blair and Ken Livingstone. After Bedlington Northumberland (see last BackPage), Bracknell is the latest town to jump on the ET bandwagon. Local resident John Hamey - yes, that one - shows us a cutting from his local rag which announces an "Aliens Have Landed" week, with "a crashed space pod in Charles Square". It is apparently part of an annual programme of daft events designed to draw people into the Berkshire town and part them from their money in local shops. Well, it worked in Roswell.

Hamey recalls that last year's Christmas decorations in the Town Square included a large rocket ship with classic grey aliens standing around holding Christmas gifts.

More Helicopter Antics

Following on from last issue's story about a phantom helicopter buzzing Peter Rogerson's home-town, the creatures have now moved to within a few miles of John Dee Cottage. The *Richmond and Twickenham Times* (February 18th, 2000) reports:

"As mysteries go it's not quite the Marie [sic] Celeste, but the Hanworth Helicopter has left the authorities scratching their heads. The low flying chopper keeps buzzing around people's houses in the Hollands Estate, where Hounslow Road meets the A316. Residents kept awake say they think it is the Metropolitan Police's surveillance helicopter, but a Scotland Yard spokesman said "There is nothing on our files".

The paper reports that the helicopter is seen 'constantly' at all times of the day and night.

The area is close to Heathrow Airport, but BAA who run the airport said "It is highly unlikely that this is anything to do with the airport. The fact that it is

hovering for such long periods suggests it is not one of ours". They also denied the possibility it was a training helicopter based at Heathrow. A Civil Aviation Authority spokesman said that without a registration number or a better description it would be impossible for them to identify it.

Fortunately there seems to be no West London equivalent of Steve 'Man at C&A' Mera, so there was no newspaper speculation about state-of-the-art helicopters which are invisible to radar and other waffle from unnamed 'military officials'.

Return of the Satan-Hunters

It is ironic that at a time when some ufologists are realising their responsibilities to the individuals they deal with and are seriously considering abandoning all research based on 'recovered memories', some professional therapists and psychiatrists are again promoting the idea of 'ritual Satanic abuse' (SRA).

Most British newspapers recently reported the re-emergence of Valerie Sinason, with a report, supposedly Government commissioned (although its exact official status is unclear), claiming that 'thousands' of children are abused and even sacrificed in Satanic rituals. Her evidence for this is entirely the recovered memories of her patients and those of other therapists who hold similar beliefs about SRA.

Sinason repeats the allegations that children are bred specially to be abused and sacrificed in Satanic rituals, and adds lurid descriptions of how these children are kept captive in cages which are kept in cellars suspended from the ceilings like giant bird-cages. Needless to say, there is no scrap of evidence for any of this, and despite the vast amount of physical evidence that such an operation would require, no-one has ever been with any criminal offences related to Sinason's allegations. This of course simply proves that the Satanists are incredibly well-

organised and able to destroy all evidence of their activities, in the same way the abducting ETs are able to conceal all evidence of their existence from sceptics.

It is encouraging that Sinason's 'report' got a rather more critical treatment from the media than similar stories in the late 80s early 90s did, with critical articles appearing in the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Independent* amongst other papers. At the time of writing this note there seems to have been no further developments. But the Satanism story is obviously still around, bubbling beneath the surface. In *Magonia* 59 (April 1997) Basil Humphreys reported on a conference at Warwick University where therapists and psychologists were working hard to keep the Satanism panic alive.

Country Matters

A number of papers on February 28th quoted a report from *The Field* magazine, house-journal of the huntin', shootin' and fishin' set, that up to a hundred big cats were wandering free in Britain. All the usual suspects were mentioned in the report, with the claim that many animals had been secretly released after new laws introduced in 1976 made it harder for private individuals to keep dangerous animals.

Sgt. Eddie Bell of the Durham police is quoted as saying "most gamekeepers in this area will admit privately to knowing the cats are out there". It's odd that they should feel the need to keep quiet about this information as any big cats loose in their part of the countryside would be likely to be doing serious harm to the animals and birds they are supposed to be guarding.

According to former zoo-keeper Quentin Rose, British conditions are ideal for leopards and pumas: "There's plenty of cover and food, the weather's fine and there are no predators".

Well there weren't until the readers of *The Field* found out about them!